



UNITED STATES OFFICE OF PERSONNEL MANAGEMENT

STATEMENT OF

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before the

**SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, PUBLIC BUILDINGS, AND
EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT,
TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE,
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

on

**STREAMLINING EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT, IMPROVING PREPAREDNESS,
AND CUTTING COSTS**

October 13, 2011

Good morning, Chairman Denham, Ranking Member Norton, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee. My name is Dean Hunter, and I am the Deputy Director for Facilities, Security, and Contracting at the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM). In that position, I have primary responsibility for security and emergency management at OPM. Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss OPM's role in determining the operating status of the Federal Government in the National Capital Region, and, in particular, our actions concerning the earthquake of August 23, 2011.

By law, individual Federal agencies possess the authority to manage their workforces and to determine the appropriate response during emergencies, including natural disasters. Nonetheless, in order to facilitate a consistent and coordinated approach on a region-wide basis, Federal, State, and local authorities have traditionally looked to OPM to determine the operating status of the Federal Government across the DC area. OPM maintains a 24-hour operations center to actively monitor unfolding events. As emergencies arise, our standard protocols include participation in conference calls hosted by the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments (MWCOG) in order to develop situational awareness, facilitate the exchange of information, and coordinate communications and response efforts among Federal, State, and local agencies and other stakeholders. Participants in these structured calls include Federal, State, and local partners in all applicable disciplines, including weather (e.g., National Weather Service), emergency planning (e.g., Federal Emergency Management Agency, emergency management agencies of DC, MD

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and VA, as well as County representatives from local jurisdictions), transportation (e.g., Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority/Metro/Metrobus, Virginia Railway Express, Maryland Area Rail Commuter, Amtrak, commuter bus lines, Departments of Transportation for DC, MD, and VA), law enforcement (e.g., Metropolitan Police Department, U.S. Park Police), utility companies (e.g., PEPCO), and school districts.

The collaborative feedback of this network of stakeholders drives OPM decisions during emergencies. Our principal priorities are to ensure the safety and security of the Federal workforce and the public and to maintain the continuity of Government operations. A rapid dissemination of the OPM message takes many forms - - from direct notification to media outlets, to posting on the OPM webpage and call-in line, notification to the Chief Human Capital Officers, the White House, and Congress, to e-mail alert notifications to subscribed employees, and updating social media including, Facebook and Twitter.

Unlike the typical weather emergencies for which OPM has historically served as the coordinator of the Government's operating status, the afternoon earthquake of August 23rd was an unprecedented, spontaneous event. At OPM Headquarters, almost immediately following the tremors, the fire alarm was pulled by one or more of our employees, triggering an evacuation. Within minutes, however, we were able to confirm with the U.S Geological Survey that a 5.8 magnitude earthquake had occurred. Our initial concerns were for the safety and security of our personnel, and we took immediate steps to conduct an orderly evacuation of our facility while building engineers began a damage assessment. We could further see that nearby Federal facilities, including the Department of the Interior and the General Services Administration (GSA) were also in the process of evacuating.

While our building evacuation was under way, and simultaneous with our effort to ensure the safety of our own employees, we began attempts to gain situational awareness in order to make an informed decision on the operating status of the Federal Government across the region. Our concerns centered on whether facilities were structurally safe to re-occupy, the length of time necessary to conduct damage assessments, the impact of potential aftershocks, and the effect of the earthquake on transportation capabilities throughout the region, including Metro and the roads and bridges.

Our efforts to obtain awareness through our traditional protocols were hampered by communication challenges. Cell phone, landline, and e-mail service was sporadic, at best. We were also unable to timely obtain Government Emergency Telecommunications Service and Wireless Priority Service connectivity. Early in the event, we were able to make contact with MWCOG and request a conference call, but communications challenges prevented MWCOG from orchestrating the call.

Because of these challenges, we resorted to other, less effective, means of determining local conditions. As first responders began their assessment efforts and actions, we monitored radio traffic over the Washington Area Warning Alert System which became a forum for status reports on damage assessments and transportation capabilities, including the operating status of bridges

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and roadways, Metro and Amtrak, among others. We were able to establish contact with the DC Homeland Security and Emergency Management Agency Director and GSA officials, and these contacts were vital in our efforts gain awareness on regional capabilities and obtain feedback on potential courses of action concerning the operating status of the Federal Government.

OPM's announcement on the status of the Federal Government was broadcast at 3:47 p.m. Given the communication challenges noted, which prevented us from having a full understanding of local conditions, and after careful review, we concluded that it would not have been prudent for OPM to issue an announcement earlier. Further, this unique event called for special tailoring of the OPM standard messaging regarding early releases. The OPM announcement recognized that many Federal agencies had already made the determination to release their employees early and further recommended that individual agencies consider early dismissal, recognizing ongoing traffic and commuting conditions. Implicit in this message was the understanding that individual agencies were better positioned to make decisions on a building-by-building basis, given the varied levels of damage anticipated and ongoing structural assessments. We concluded that a blanket, OPM region-wide determination was neither feasible nor appropriate.

Throughout the evening of August 23rd, and in the subsequent days, OPM worked actively with GSA to post information concerning the operational status of Federal facilities. On August 24th, the Federal Government was OPEN with the option for Unscheduled Leave or Unscheduled Telework. GSA closed thirty-three facilities pending a final structural assessment prior to re-occupancy.

The good news about this event is that, in fact, no one was injured, the commute that afternoon, though more difficult than an average commute home, was generally not as challenging as we have seen in recent weather-related early releases, and the vast majority of the Federal agencies in the region were able to re-open the next day, on time. Nonetheless, we recognized immediately that it was critical that OPM and the relevant authorities take steps to determine what improvements OPM should put in place in the event of future, similar events.

Prior to and since the earthquake, we have been working closely with our Federal, State, and local partners to amend the OPM decision framework to include a Shelter-in-Place option. Further, we are actively engaged with MWCOG in an interagency effort to strengthen emergency management efforts throughout the region, with an eye towards enhancing communications capabilities in the future. Recognizing that getting the message into the hands of our Federal employees is paramount, we are maximizing the use of social media, including Twitter and Facebook, to reach personnel the fastest in an ongoing event. Further, we are strengthening our partnerships at the local level, including recent OPM participation in the District of Columbia's functional emergency management exercise on September 28th. Additionally, we have reached out to our internal OPM community through a town hall forum to reiterate that sheltering-in-place is almost always the best option to follow until a full picture of the circumstances at hand can be obtained.

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In conclusion, the OPM determination on August 23rd took time to gather situational awareness to make an informed decision, given the unique nature of the event, communications challenges, our own internal evacuation, and the need to develop a robust understanding of the transportation capabilities of the region before a decision could be made. On the whole, our initial assessment is that our efforts were successful in light of these factors; however, as with any major undertaking, a full review with all of our partners is necessary to analyze lessons learned, and to determine where we can bridge critical gaps.

Thank you for this opportunity, I am happy to address any questions that you may have.